

Spanish Fort  
Bayou St. John & Lake Pontchartrain  
Orleans Parish, Louisiana

HABS No.18-25

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
District No. 18

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Richard Koch, District Officer  
614 Audubon Building, New Orleans, Louisiana

"SPANISH FORT" (Abandoned)

Bayou St. John at Lake Pontchartrain      New Orleans  
Orleans Parish      Louisiana

Owner

New Orleans Public Service, Inc.,  
317 Baronne Street, New Orleans, Louisiana

Date of Erection

1808

Architect

Builder

U. S. War Department

Present Condition

Ruinous

Number of Stories

Materials of Construction

Brick walls on cypress plank foundation

Other Existing Records

J. H. De Grange - Historical Data of Spanish Fort;  
Louisiana Historical Society, Ja.-Oct. 1917

Descriptive Catalogue - Papelles Procedentes de Cuba;  
Seville - Carnegie Institute, 1916, p. 112

New Orleans Times-Picayune - May 15, 1932

Duke of Saxe Weimar, Travels in North America - 1825

New Orleans Public Library Scrapbook - Class 976.31  
Acc. No. 198520, p.273

J. S. Kendall History of New Orleans - Lewis Publish-  
ing Company, 1922 V.II, p.755

Files of War Department

American State Papers; Military Affairs - Vol. 1,  
pp 229; 236; 246; 311. Vol. 2, p. 50. Vol. 3, p.247  
249

Darby's History of Louisiana - John Mellish,  
Philadelphia, 1816; p. 187

Latour's History of the War in Louisiana - J. Conrad & Co., Philadelphia, 1816

Miles Weekly Register - March 4, 1815; p. 420

B. J. Lessong - History of the War of 1812; Harper & Bros., 1868, p. 1027

W. James - Military Occurrences Between Great Britain and America; Vol. 2, p. 346

Flint - History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley, 1832; p. 257

Wilkinson's Memoirs - Vol. 2, p. 355

#### Additional Data

Bayou St. John was an important factor in the selection of the site of New Orleans, as it afforded a convenient means of access from the other French settlements along the Gulf Coast, Mobile and Biloxi, through Mississippi Sound and Lake Borgne and Pontchartrain, avoiding the difficult ascent of the river it seems reasonable to believe that the French erected at the Bayou's mouth some sort of fortification to protect this waterway. It was probably nothing more than a wood palisade of which all traces have disappeared.

When Spain took possession of the Colony, this fortification was strengthened. There still exist traces of a shell concrete foundation which supported a wood palisade.

No documents of the French and Spanish period have been found describing this fort, although there are in the Papeles Procedentes de Cuba in the Archivo General de

Indias in Seville letters referring to the forts and a letter in 1779 containing instructions to the Commandant of San Juan del Bayou, by which name the fort was known.

Trudeau's map of 1798 shows the Fort close to the shore of the lake. It is similarly shown on a map of Pelie, surveyor of the City of New Orleans, a copy of which is in the files of the War Department, Drawer 133, Sheet 91. It is dated June 20, 1829, but the original of the map is however much earlier.

After the United States took possession of Louisiana the fort was still further strengthened. Frequent references to it are found in early histories and writings of that period. These writings reveal that the fortifications which now remain on the banks of the Bayou were built by the War Department in 1808. The fort was apparently never completed according to the original plans, nor did it figure in a military engagement. It was, however, garrisoned before the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, to prevent the attack on the city by way of the lake.

In a report of December 7, 1807, Secretary of War H. Dearborn states that: "At the junction of Bayou St. John with Lake Pontchartrain, a small ancient work remains, intended to guard that communication with New Orleans against the approach of an enemy by way of the Lake. This work is out of repair and will probably require considerable improvement." (American State Papers,

Military Affairs, Vol. 1- p. 229) In a later report in the same volume (p. 236) dated January 6, 1809, it is stated that: "At the mouth of Bayou St. John a strong new battery has been erected, which commands the passage from Lake Pontchartrain in the City of New Orleans." This work is referred to in a letter of James Wilkinson to Wm. Eustis, (Secretary of War L. Wilkinson's Memoirs, Vol. 2, p. 355) dated New Orleans, May 12, 1809, in which it is stated: "The battery at the Bayou St. John is completed, but the place is without barracks, or rear defences; I shall forbid their erection until I hear from you, because the work is really useless; and to construct them would be to throw away 15 to 20 thousand dollars more."

This is in the files of the War Department, Drawer 133, Sheet 7, a plan of these works referred to by Wilkinson, dated July 18, 1809. This plan shows the breast-works and buildings which had been erected and those which were proposed, and objected to by Wilkinson. There is no evidence that these works were ever completed.

The next mention of the Fort is also found in the American State Papers (Vol. 1- p. 311) December 17, 1811: "At the Bayou St. John a strong battery of six guns, which commands the passage of Lake Pontchartrain, with barracks for thirty men. (Number and description of troops, artillerists - 78)" The location of this barracks is unknown.

Darby mentions the fort in his HISTORY OF LOUISIANA - John Mellish, Philadelphia, 1816; p. 187. He says: "Fort St. John at the entrance of Bayou St. John into Lake Pontchartrain, is very well situated to defend this important pass. From the nature of the country, armies can only proceed by water to New Orleans, and St. John could not easily be taken or passed, if well garrisoned and defended."

The Fort next comes into prominence in connection with preparation for the Battle of New Orleans. General Andrew Jackson landed here when he came to take command of the American forces.

Latour's HISTORY OF THE WAR IN LOUISIANA - John Conrad & Co., Philadelphia, 1816, says: "The garrison of Fort St. John on Lake Pontchartrain had been reinforced by a volunteer company of light artillery under the command of Lieutenant Wagner. Others (of Lafitte's Baratarians) enlisted in one or the other of the three companies of marines raised by Captains Songis, Lagand and Colson.

The first of these companies was sent to the Fort of Petites Coquilles, the second to that of St. Philip, and the third to Bayou St. John."

A letter from Commodore Patterson to the Secretary of the Navy appearing in NILES WEEKLY REGISTER, Saturday, March 4, 1815, p. 420, states: "Captain Henley merits my

acknowledgements for his unremitted attention to the execution of the various duties committed to him, particularly to the superintendence of the erection of the two batteries on the Bayou St. John."

B. J. Lessong's HISTORY OF THE WAR OF 1812 - Harper & Bro., New York, 1868; p. 1027, mentions the Fort: "December 18, 1814, Major Plauche was sent with his battalion to the Bayou St. John, northward of the city; and at its mouth, on Lake Pontchartrain, Major Hughes was in command of Fort St. John."

In Wm. James' MILITARY OCCURRENCES BETWEEN GREAT BRITAIN AND AMERICA; Vol. 2, p. 346, appears the following: "At this time the real strength of Fort Coquille was generally known in camp; and some one proposed for the army to be moved back, by a route pointed out, to Lake Pontchartrain; and thence, after taking the Forts Coquille and St. John (in which there would be no difficulty) to proceed down Bayou St. John to New Orleans. The attack in front with such an army was, however, thought to be readiest, as it certainly was the boldest mode."

About 1823 the Fort was sold to Harvey Elkins by special act of Congress. Elkins erected a hotel on the Fort, which is mentioned by the Duke of Saxe-Weimar writing in 1825 of his "Travels in North America." He describes his arrival at the Bayou after a voyage from Mobile, as follows:

"After we passed the Rigolets we arrived in Lake Pontchartrain, then turned left from the lighthouse of Fort St. John, which protects the Bayou of the same name, leading to New Orleans. I awoke on the 21st of January, as we entered the Bayou St. John. This water is so broad that we could not see the northern shore. We remained at the entrance an hour, to give the sailors a short rest, who had worked the whole night and whose duty it now was to tow the vessel to the city, six miles distant. This fort, which has lost its importance since the erection of Chef Menteur and Petites Coquilles, is abandoned, and a tavern is now building in its place. It lies five hundred paces distant from the sea, but on account of the marshy banks cannot be thence attacked without great difficulty. The bank is covered with thick beams, to make it hold firm, which covering in this hot and damp climate perishes very quickly. The causeway which runs along the Bayou is made of earth on a foundation of timber. Behind the fort is a public house, called "Pontchartrain Hotel", which is much frequented by persons from the city during the summer."

There is also in the files of the War Department, Drawer 133, Sheet 20, a map which accompanied Raffignac's letter of January 5, 1828, which shows some of the work done on the fort by Elkins. It shows . . . "a large tavern constructed by Elkins after having demolished the parapets, demolished the powder magazine, one portion



~~one portion~~ of the palisades and top of the embankment, and a portion of the moats." This map also shows the Fort very close to the shore of the Lake.

A map dated New Orleans, 1st July, 1830, by L. Bringies, Surveyor General, shows in considerable detail the arrangement of the grounds and buildings on the property as used by Elkins. The first floor plans of the building are also shown. The Fort appears to be quite far from the Lake Shore. This map is preserved in the Notarial Archives in the New Orleans Court House.

The walls of the Fort were allowed to fall into decay and soon acquired such a ruinous appearance that it came to be generally believed that they were the remains of the original Spanish fortifications. Thus the name "SPANISH FORT" came to be applied to work constructed by the Americans. Many later writers refer to the Fort as being of Spanish construction, even describing in some detail how the bricks were brought from Spain as ballast and assigning the work to Governors Ulloa or Carondelet. Flint's HISTORY & GEOGRAPHY OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY (p. 257) 1832, states:

"Fort St. John, at the entrance of Bayou St. John into Lake Pontchartrain, is well situated for the defense of the pass. It is an ancient establishment of the former regime. The guns are of vast calibre; but they appear to be sealed, and the walls have a ruinous aspect."

Flint's information, of course may have come from a source previous to 1808, when the American fortification was built.

Podine Schoenberger writing in the Times-Picayune May 15, 1932, traces its subsequent history as follows:

"Mr. Elkins built the Bayou St. John Hotel and Spanish Fort began to be regarded as a pleasure center. Subsequently the Fort site passed into the hands of John Slidell, who sold it to the City Park and Lake Railroad Company.

In 1877 it was sold again to Moses Schwartz, who in 1878 successfully operated it as an amusement park. In 1883 a theatre was built near the Fort and during its zenith as a summer resort an opera company occupied it for several seasons. It was here that Oscar Wilde lectured, the theatre subsequently burning to the ground.

The property on which the ruins of the Fort were located now belongs to the New Orleans Public Service, Inc., who formerly made it into a popular lakeside resort and picnic ground. In recent years, however, it has been abandoned."

The Fort is located on the left bank of Bayou St. John, 1600 feet from Lake Pontchartrain. The site selected was a natural shell bank which afforded an excellent foundation. In some places, however, the walls are erected on

a foundation of cypress timbers 10 inches square, over which are placed 3 x 12 inch planks. These timbers are still in a very good condition as are also the heavy brick walls which were erected on them. There are very few cracks although there has been considerable settlement.

The main breastworks face the Lake and consist of two heavy concentrically curved brick walls. The space between these walls is filled with earth. The sides of the fort are parallel, consisting of heavy brick walls which run back for a distance of about 35 feet and then splay outward for about 28 feet. These walls are battered and have a belt course of brick near the top.

On top of the front walls, brick battlements were erected after the abandonment of the Fort, and cannons were placed in the embrasure. An iron fence was erected around the parapet for the protection of visitors, with iron gates hung from brick gate posts, on top of the side walls. These gates are approached by means of brick stairways. These additions were made when the Fort was used as a part of an amusement park and was planted within a formal garden. The gate, fence, and cannons have since been removed.

Inside the Fort there is a low wall following the general form of the outer walls. It is not certain when or why this wall was erected. Excavations revealed, however, that the foundations of the hotel which were built after the abandonment of the Fort are beneath the wall. Foundations

of various other buildings of the hotel establishment, as well as foundations of two cisterns were also found in excavations undertaken for this survey.

One of the most interesting things revealed by the excavations, is the remains of an old shell concrete wall, mentioned before as being probably the remains of the old Spanish Fort. This wall was built of lime mortar made from burned clam shells, which was back filled against a timber and board stockade. The brick walls of the existing Fort are built over the rough concrete wall. These various foundations are from 6 inches to 4 feet below the surface of the ground.

May 9, 1935

Samuel Wilson, Jr.

*Reviewed 1936, H.C.F.*

November 4, 1941.

Extracts Referring to Spanish Fort, from a  
Report of Laussat on the Condition of the  
Public Buildings in New Orleans,  
January 10, 1804, together with a Military  
Memoire by Vinache on the same subject.  
Col. C-13-A-51. p. 84, and  
Col. C-13-A-53. p. 149.  
Translated from the French in the  
Archives Nationales, Paris, by  
Samuel Wilson, Jr., through  
The Edward Langley Scholarship,  
The American Institute of Architects. 1938.

P. 219. Military Memoire made by the Chief of  
the Battalion of Engineers, Vinache.

The city of New Orleans, situated on the left bank of the Mississippi at 30 leagues from its mouth can scarcely be called fortified, five small forts in earth of little relief, surrounded by a ditch where there is little water, joined by curtains equally in earth in the form of covered way branches, whose ditch is in many places dry; forms all its defense. The redoubts which are found placed between the forts at the center of the curtains are entirely ruined. Scarcely any traces of them remain. The palisades and the ruffs of the works are also ruined in part. In a word the place is not susceptible to any defense, and is not even sheltered from a sudden attack. The faubourg, St. Mary, situated to the west of the place, runs along it entirely for a distance of more than 600 toises and renders the fortifications of this port absolutely null. Some habitations situated at north - quarter east from the place run along it equally on its left plane, and it is with reason that they can be considered as fortifications placed now almost in the center of the city. It is since the last fire that it has been permitted to build so near the fortifications which seem more to be turned against the place than to contribute to its exterior defense.

The slight advantage which can be drawn from these fortifications will determine without doubt, to raze them entirely and to carry the views of defense on the important points, such as Bayou St. John, situated at the north quarter - west from the city, from which one can come easily from Lake Pontchartrain to attack it on its rear, with the aid of a canal which comes from this lake to a half league from the city where is found an easy road to come there with heavy artillery. There is already located on this point a redoubt which has been made to defend the pass of this Bayou at its mouth. It is in earth and dressed with wood, but it requires some repairs. It is armed with eight iron canons. This post, once taken, one comes without difficulty, as I have said above almost to the gates of the city.

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Estimate in general of the masonry existing  
at Fort St. Jean of the Bayou.

A barracks of 48 feet of length by 20 of width and 7 of height the walls of the said barracks made of colombage.

A powder magazine, built of bricks, having 12 feet of length and 12 of width and 8 of height, plus two chimneys, one in the barracks and the other in the kitchen.

The general survey of this masonry has given to the total 5-2/3 toises cubed, estimated at the rate of 8 piastres the toise which makes in silver of France the sum of

226 livres 8 sols 0 deniers

Estimation of the revetment made of timber-work.

The general survey of all the framing and carpentry of the said fort and of its lodgings has been estimated in total including the estimation of the lift bridge of the large bayou at the sum of

3,196 livres 0 sols 0 deniers

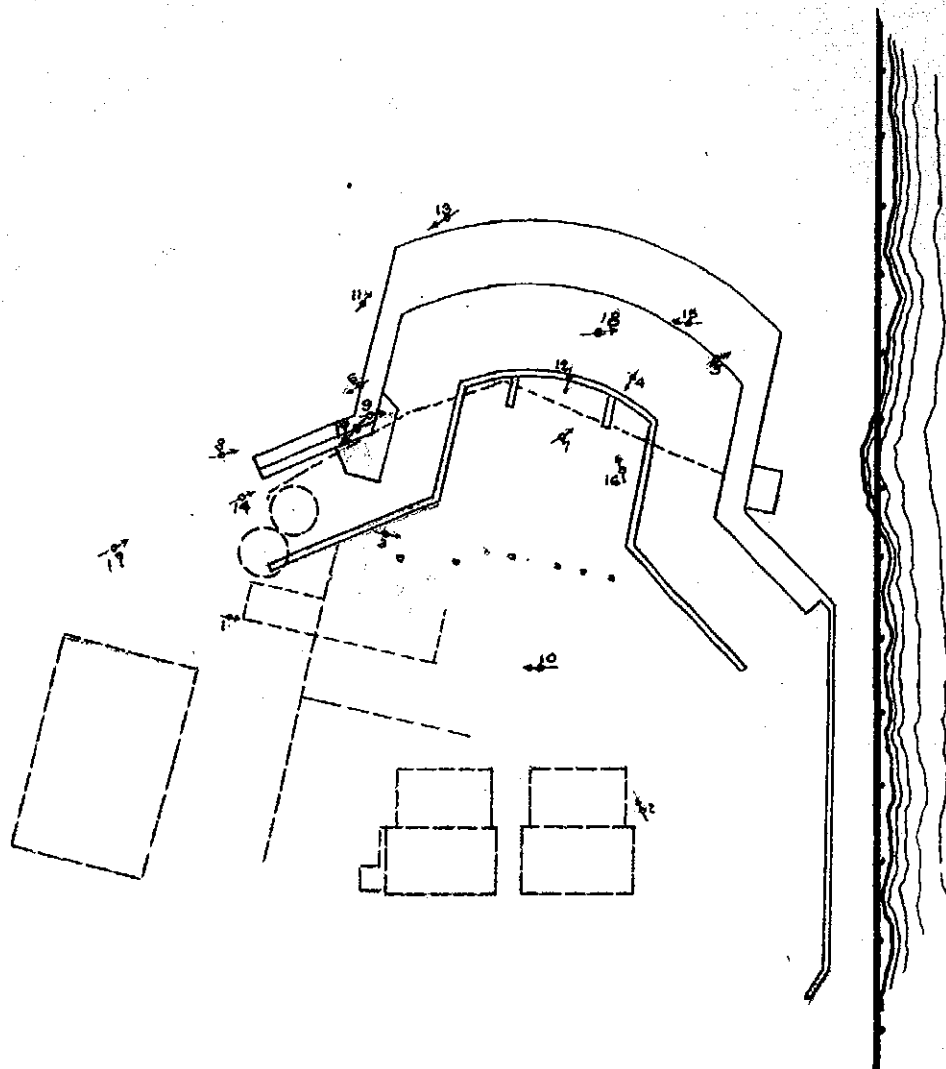
Hardware.

The general total of the hardware has been estimated at its just value at the price of 125 livres 0 sols 0 deniers

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RICHARD KOCH,  
District Officer,  
Historic American Buildings Survey  
in Louisiana.

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PHOTO'S 14, 15, 16 WERE TAKEN BEFORE EXCAVATION

Note: Arrows shown on this plan indicate position of camera.